

Telling a story with paintings

Mims' new works a visual vocabulary

By Janet Kutner
Art Critic

Jack Mims' new paintings are as tough and introspective as ever, but their symbolic content is easier to read and their brushwork is downright exhilarating. In fact, even without knowing a thing about Mims or his deeply philosophical approach to his art, one can get

ART REVIEW

swept away by the exuberance of these new paintings.

The two largest works — each done in unstretched oil-on-canvas and each measuring 8 feet by 12 feet — are typical Mims feats. Each confronts the viewer with a mind-boggling array of figurative and emblematic images.

The smaller acrylic-on-tin paintings
Please see MIMS on Page 14C.



Jack Mims' *The Hunter's Head*.

Continued from Page 1C.

are just as boldly delineated, and their vivid colors, along with the glitter that Mims has sprinkled across their surfaces, lends them the almost-garish spirit of Mexican folk art.

However, the narrative messages contained within these bright packages are quite serious.

Virtually all of Mims' works are autobiographical, and his paintings easily can be thought of as psychodramas in which he plays the main roles. The figures in the new paintings are self-portraits, but because his works deal with the dualities that exist in each personality, his image is represented by female as well as male attributes, by animals as well as people and by dismembered parts of the human body as well as by the whole.

Some conflicts come across instantly — such as that between the romantic side of his nature, represented by a nude couple on horseback soaring through space, and the practical, portrayed by a male figure seated before a map, his feet planted firmly on the ground and candles by his side.

But each painting also involves subtle innuendos. And just as each portion of Mims' monumental canvases can be broken down into

Exhibition information

"Jack Mims: New Paintings and Woodblock Prints," through Nov. 7 at Barry Whistler Gallery, 2909-A Canton St. Hours are Tuesday through Saturday 10 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. and by appointment. Admission is free. For information, call 939-0242.

myself from," he says. "Then, when I die, one of these aspects will become my spirit.

"If I'm a gerbil when I die, then a gerbil will be my ghost," he adds, only to take the maudlin edge off his comments.

Viewers are free to interpret Mims' paintings as they will, but he provides more than enough clues to put them on the track he would like them to pursue. In fact, the two large (3½-by-8-foot) wood-block prints in the exhibit function almost like dictionaries of the symbols and concepts carried forth in the paintings.

One print depicts a pinwheel, a meat hook, a measuring instrument known as a caliper, and a tontine. The other print portrays more nightmarish images, such as a human-headed windsock thrusting itself toward a wolf-dog and a three-headed human being.

The acrylic-on-tin paintings,

prominently in the new paintings, while others appear on the stamped tin borders that frame their images. Geometric motifs that can be traced to American Indian cave paintings are also still present, but they have become considerably looser and more abstract.

Mims has been making paintings of high caliber since the early 1970s, when he was part of a lively group of Oak Cliff artists who gained national attention for their independent works and their collective spirit. A sensitive and extremely intelligent talent with one foot in art history and another in the clouds, Mims has steadily expanded his vision over the years, never settling for the status quo.

His art often has made him appear naked before the eyes of the public, figuratively as well as literally, but his compulsion to express himself has helped him overcome any fear of the repercussions such exposure might bring.

Now, with a solid body of work behind him and his imagination soaring ever higher, Mims has burst into his most creative period to date. Turbulent gestures replace the violent images of earlier works, and veiled allusions supplant concepts that were so deeply imbedded

smaller narrative segments, so fragmented parts of the human body can be construed as separate components of Mims' personality.

All of Mims' new works are based on the theme of a tontine, an annuity pact in which the last surviving investor of a group receives the bulk of the proceeds.

"But rather than being a traditional pact, the tontine as it relates to the paintings is between two aspects of my own person," Mims says. "I'm trying to say, 'What is my ghost going to be?'"

"If I can break down the parts of my character into elemental components, then I will know what to integrate and what to disassociate

which were done after the monumental oils, also expand upon images found in the larger works. For instance, one acrylic titled *The Geographer* is a variation on the male figure seated before the map. And an acrylic titled *The Romancers* is a modification of the nude couple on horseback.

The more one looks at Mims' paintings, the more one learns to read his visual vocabulary. Some symbols, including an orchid and a crow, have appeared in his paintings for more than a decade. Books, umbrellas, boats, crosses, crowns and anchors have also been part of his iconography for many years.

Some of these motifs figure

in the subconscious that even Mims had trouble explaining them.

His art has lost none of its sense of urgency, but it has gained tremendously in terms of force.

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